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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to explore the language or discourse of the administrative assistant in an effort to gain insight into the development of the superior/subordinate relationship. The study also explored differences in gender-based behavioral expectations identified through a content analysis of administrative assistants' messages. The Secretary as Manager Questionnaire was completed by 941 women attending a management development seminar. Respondents were asked to describe what they liked most and liked least about their bosses. Eighty-six responses from those with male bosses were randomly selected for comparison with those of the 86 subjects with female bosses. Two messages from the 172 selected responses were analyzed to identify factors that produce like and dislike in the superior/subordinate relationship. The initial analysis suggested that the simultaneous emergence of women in upper-management and the increased demands for administrative assistants, who are primarily women, has brought about significant changes in organizational behaviors. The most noticeable of these appear to be in the behaviors of male bosses who are developing what, in the past, have been considered positive feminine traits. In addition the study provides early indications that not only do women work well together, but also that bonding and supportive female superior-subordinate relationships are rapidly emerging in the organizational environment. (HTH)

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GENDER COMMUNICATION IN THE OFFICE/ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

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INTRODUCTION

The superior-subordinate relationship is a vital, delicate, and potentially volatile componet within the organizational setting. Perhaps nowhere is the need for compatibility more intensified than in the boss-administrative assistant relationship. This paper examines this unique relationship from the perspective of the administrative assistant.

The administrative assistant is somewhat of a phenomenon in that the number of women holding these positions is steadily increasing yet the title doesn't even appear on the Department of Training's list of official positions.

The administrative assistant is an individual, usually a woman, who has secretarial skills but who spends a great deal of her time engaging in typical management functions and helping her boss to perform his or her management duties. The administrative assistant works with the upper-level manager to plan, organize, coordinate, delegate, and control the flow of work in the organization. As such, it would appear that compatability between these two individuals is a necessary component for an effective relationship.

Furthermore, current research indicates that the need for administrative assistants will steadily increase as we move deeper into the information age and the need to manage and disseminate information becomes the focal point of the organization. The administrative assistant is the individual who will manage this information for her boss and, as such, the exploration of this emerging relationship is necessary for a

better understanding of organizational effectiveness.

The presence of a women in upper-management positions is also an emerging phenomenon. As women slowly move into upper-management, they will begin to share in the rewards that are associated with increased responsibility and upward movement in the organization. That is, these women will have their own administrative assistants to help them perform their management activities.

The simultaneous emergence of these two phenomena provides the organizational researcher with a rare and unique opportunity to observe and record the developmental stages of this somewhat unique superior-subordinate relationship. This paper examines the language or discourse of the administrative assistant in an effort to gain insight into the development of this relationship. In addition, this paper explores differences in gender based behavioral expectations which are identified through a content analysis of messages produced by the administrative assistants.

This is a working paper and it only reports the results of some initial analyses. The paper does not attempt to explain the findings from a theoretical or conceptual framework. Rather, the completed analyses should provide the foundation for the development of a theoretical framework that will serve as a basis for understanding the administrative assistant-boss relationship.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The Secretary as Manager Questionnaire was administered to 941 women who were voluntarily attending a management development

seminar for secretaries/administrative assistants that is offered in various locations across the nation. The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the seminar and the women were told that the information was to be used to help develop a more meaningful seminar. The women were encouraged to be frank and honest in their responses and it was explained that their responses would remain anonymous.

Included in the questionnaire were two open-ended statements that the women were asked to complete. Specifically, the statements were:

1. The thing I like most about my boss is. . .
2. The thing I like least about my boss is. . .

The messages produced from the completion of Item 1 were analyzed to determine the factors that produce LIKING in the superior-subordinate relationship. The messages produced from the the completion of Item 2 were analyzed to determine the factors tht produce DISLIKING in the superior-subordinate relationship.

To avoid creating a bias, the subjects were not asked to indicate the superior's gender. Gender was determined by the use of male and female pronouns (he, she, him, her) in the actual messages. Only 86 of the 941 subjects actually had female bosses. The category system described below was based on the responses of all 941 subjects. Then 86 subjects from the male boss population were randomly selected for the comparative content analysis.

In total, two messages from 172 female subjects were analyzed to identify factors that produce liking and disliking in

this superior-subordinate relationship. Eighty-six of the subjects had female bosses and 86 had male bosses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a method or technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of a message or messages. Through content analysis, it is possible not only to describe or report on the state of an organization, it is also possible to identify--though sometimes very subtly--how one feels about the state of the organization or reacts towards particular events within the organization.

One of the most difficult as well as basic problems a researcher is faced with when utilizing content analysis is: what category system to use? Holsti (1969) explains that "because content analysts are not generally agreed on standard categories, even for given classes of problems, the investigator often finds himself in the position of having to develop his own for the question at hand" (p. 11).

Lasswell (1949), Berelson (1952), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Holsti *et al.* (1968/69), Holsti (1969), Gerbner (1969), and Glaser (1978) all suggest that it is the "question at hand" that determines the merit of content analysis research. This sentiment is echoed by statistician, John W. Tukey:

> Far better an approximate answer to the right question, which is often vague, than an exact answer to the wrong question which can always be made precise. Data analysis must progress by approximate answers, at best, since its knowledge of what the problem is will, at best, be approximate (Tukey, 1962, pp. 12-14).

Glaser (1978), and Glaser and Strauss (1967), view the development of a category system that "emerges" from data as appropriate for theory development. They see this procedure as a strength and not a weakness associated with content analysis.

Grounded theory, originally advanced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a method that allows theory to develop through discovery. It is theory which emerges from the data. Glaser (1978) explains that data should not be forced or selected to fit pre-conceived or pre-existent categories or discarded in favor of keeping extant theory intact. He suggests that grounded theory arrives at relevance because it allows core problems and processs to emerge from the data. Grounded theory is a process and a method of developing, building, and clarifying theoretical perspectives.

In the present study, the data base consisted of two messages produced by the subjects. Content analysis was employed to examine the messages but rather than applying a preconceived category system to the messages, the category system was allowed to emerge from the messages. Thus, the category system itself is the outcome of the initial stage of analysis.

The development of the basic category system for this research was guided by grounded theory principles and open systematic coding procedures (Glaser, 1978). The coding of messages within the framework of the category system and the coding of subcategories followed traditional content analysis rules and procedures.

THE CATEGORY SYSTEM

Four themes and nine topics emerged from the messages

produced by the subjects. They are described below:

THEMES

SUPERIOR DEPENDENT LIKING OR DISLIKING: These messages describe some aspect of the superior and suggest that liking or disliking is dependent upon some quality or activity that is inherent in or performed by the superior.

Example: he is nice

RELATIONSHIP DEPENDENT LIKING OR DISLIKING: These messages describe some aspect of the superior-subordinate relationship and suggest that liking or disliking is dependent upon some interaction that occurs between the superior and the subordinate. A relationship dependent theme must include a direct reference to the subject as the recepient of or participant in some superior oriented behavior.

Example: he is nice to me.

SUPERIOR AND RELATIONSHIP DEPENDENT LIKING OR DISLIKING: These messages include both superior dependent and relationship dependent liking or disliking statements.

Example: she is nice and she treats me fairly

NO THEME: The word nothing or no response indicated the absence of a liking or disliking theme.

TOPICS

COMMUNICATION: Statements that make reference to the superior's ability to communicate or describe some aspect of communication such as listening, discussion, openness, etc. Communication, as a topic, was present in both superior dependent

thematic messages and relationship dependent thematic messages.

MANAGERIAL COMPETENCE: Statements that make reference to the superior's competence with respect to the job and/or statements that describe a management function or task oriented behavior performed by the superior. This topic is found in superior dependent thematic messages.

PERSONAL COMPETENCE: Statement that make reference to some aspect of the superior's personality or character. This topic is found in superior dependent thematic messages.

OVERWORKED: This is a special topic that is only found in superior dependent disliking thematic messages and specifically states that the superior is overworked or has too much responsibility.

AUTONOMY: Statements that indicate the subordinate is allowed to control her own work environment. This topic is found in relationship dependent thematic messages.

MENTORSHIP: Statements that indicate the superior is loyal to the subordinate and/or is attempting to teach, advance, or develop the subordinate. This topic is found in relationship dependent liking thematic messages.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP: Statements that describe how the superior and subordinate get along. This topic is found in relationship dependent liking thematic messages.

RECOGNITION: Statements that indicate the superior gives or doesn't give recognition for or directly acknowledges or doesn't acknowledge the work that is performed by the subordinate. This topic is found in relationship dependent

thematic messages.

CONFIDENCE/CREDIBILITY: Statements that indicate the superior has or does not have confidence in the subordinate's abilities and/or does or does not beleive the subordinate is competent. This topic is found in relationship dependent thematic messages.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Once the category system is allowed to emerge from the data and the definitions are constructed, it is possible to do a comparative analysis of the message contents. The messages are examined to determine which theme is present and the themes are then examined to determine which topics are present in a given thematic message. Then the messages produced by subjects with female bosses are separated out from the messages produced by subjects with male bosses and the presence of themes and topics are retabulated to determine the impact that gender has on the factors of liking and disliking.

Summary Table 1 reports the initial comparative content analysis of the liking messages produced by the 172 female subjects.

[INSERT SUMMARY TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Examination of this table suggests that liking is primarily dependent on something that is inherent in the superior. In particular, there is something in the personal makeup or personal competence of the superior that is most likely to produce liking. This is true regardless of whether the boss is male or female.

However, further analysis of the topics discussed within the

thematic messages provides insight into the impact that gender has on the superior-subordinate relationship. The topic of interpersonal relationships (how we get along) is only present in the messages produced by subjects with male bosses. Furthermore, the topic of mentorship is primarily present in messages produced by subjects with female bosses.

In addition, the topics of confidence, recognition, and autonomy can be combined to create a special category called overall subordinate competence. When this is done, another major factor of liking emerges for the male boss. Similarly, superior dependent and relationship dependent communication can be combined into a special category of overall communication competence. When this is done, communication competence emerges as a major factor of liking for both the male and female bosses.

Summary Table 2 presents the comparative content analysis of the disliking messages produced by the subjects.

[INSERT SUMMARY TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Examination of this table clearly suggest that dis'iking is dependent upon something inherent in the superior. In particular, it is the lack of managerial competence that produces disliking.

For the male boss, overall communication incompetence is a factor that significantly impacts disliking. For the female boss, lack of confidence in the subordinate produces disliking but lack of recognition appears to have no impact on disliking.

A special topical category emerged out of the disliking messages that is unique to female bosses. Eight.percent of the subjects suggested that the thing they liked least about their

boss was that she was overworked, too busy, or burdened with too much responsibility.

Summary Table 3 rank orders the reasons for liking and disliking the boss. Examination of this table suggests that the importance of disliking factors is similar for male and female bosses but that the importance of liking factors is distinctly different.

[INSERT SUMMARY TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Personal competence is the primary factor that induces liking of male and female bosses. Subordinate competence--the willingness of the male boss to express confidence in the subordinate, recognize her contribution, and allow her complete work autonomy--emerges as a major factor of liking when the boss is male. To the contrary, subordinate competence is the least important factor when the boss is female.

For the female boss, managerial competence and mentorship are important factors of liking. That is, the female subordinate expects her boss to be a competent manager and she looks to the female boss for assistance in her own professional development. It should also be noted that 19% of the subjects stated there wasn't anything they disliked about their female bosses.

The degree to which themes or topics are present in the messages produced by the subjects provides considerable insight into the superior-subordinate relationship. Further analysis of the vocabulary that is used in these messages, however, clearly establishes that gender based behavioral expectations still exist.

GLOSSARIES OF SHARED AND UNIQUE DESCRIPTORS

A closer examination of the words that are used by the female subjects provides additional information about the superior-subordinate relationship and suggest that changes have taken place in organizations particularly with respect to male behaviors.

A glossary of terms that describe liking and disliking and help to clarify topical definitions was constructed. Shared descriptors are words or phrases that are used to describe both male and female bosses. Unique descriptors are words or phrases that are used only when describing a female boss or only when describing a male boss.

Glossaries 1 and 2 present the shared and unique liking descriptors.

[INSERT GLOSSARY 1 AND GLOSSARY 2 ABOUT HERE]

It is possible to make some inferences about male and female behaviors through a closer examination of these descriptors. There are basically four inferences that can be made about observed behaviors which will ultimately lead to a set of expected behaviors.

1. The most obvious inference that can be made is that male and female bosses display many similar traits and behaviors. In general, the superiors display and the subordinates expect clear and concise verbal communication skills, efficient and effective leadership, warm and sensitive personalities, and a genuine respect for and supportivenss of the subordinate as an important contributor to organizational effectiveness.

2. There is an emergence of male behaviors that may, indeed, be the result of the female's entrance into the ranks of upper-management. The words that are used to describe personal competency for the male boss reveal an emergence of traits that, in the past, would have been considered feminine. Less than half of the terms used to describe the personal competency of the male boss can be considered typical masculine traits. The rest of the terms that are unique to males and the terms that are shared and unique to females suggest that the subordinate observes and expects the boss to be personable, warm, caring, considerate, and, in general, a nice, nuturing individual.

3. The subordinate still observes and expects different interpersonal interactions from and with the male and female bosses. From the male, the subordinate is looking for and expects a friendly but separate or distant relationship. From the female, the subordinate observes and expects and interactive, supportive, and developmental relationship. In general, the females are expecting their female bosses to help them develop and advance in the organization and they view their relationship as a partnership. They are members of the same team. This is an early indicator that women can and do work well together and it dispells the myth that women do not want to work for other women.

4. Words like receptive, dedicated, committed, honest, enthusiastic, energetic, loyal, interested, and encourage are descriptors that are unique to the female and suggest that women are interjecting new life into the organization. They are

helping to create a positive, dynamic, and productive climate.

Glossaries 3 and 4 present the shared and unique disliking descriptors and provide support for the inferences advanced above.

[INSERT GLOSSARY 3 AND GLOSSARY 4 ABOUT HERE]

Overall, the disliking glossaries suggest that:

1. Male bosses have problems communicating but female bosses, who are also described as overworked, simply have difficultly finding the time to communicate.

2. Female subordinates are dissatisfied when their female bosses display behaviors that are not supportive and interactive.

3. Female subordinates expect their male bosses to display mangerial competence but they do not expect them to display superior, domineering, or unethical behaviors.

4. Male and female bosses share similar inadequacies: procrastination, disorganization, failure to attend to details, changing moods, and closed mindedness.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

This initial analysis suggest that the simultaneous emergence of women in upper-management and the increased demands for administrative assistants, who are primarily women, has already brought about significant changes in organizational behaviors. The most noticeable emerging changes appear to be in the behaviors of male bosses who are developing behaviors that, in the past, were considered positive feminine traits.

In addition, the research provides early indications that women not only work well together, but that bonding and supportive female superior-subordinate relationships are rapidly

emerging in the organizational environment. This finding suggests that dramatic changes may begin to emerge in our organizations.

It is important that we not understate the influence of the subordinate in the development of these superior-subordinate relationships. The women who are advancing into these administrative assistant positions are not submissive, docile, or uneducated. They are intelligent women who have excellent organizational skills and technological expertise. It may, indeed, by possible that these women are intolerant of and simply do not accept aggessive, demeaning, and non-supportive behaviors. As such, this intolerance, may serve as the antecedent to the emerging behavioral changes. This thought certainly deserves further investigation.

SUMMARY TABLE I

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF LIKING MESSAGES

CATEGORIES	MALE BOSS	FEMALE BOSS	ALL BOSSES
THEMES:			
Superior Dependent Liking	51%	48%	49%
Relationship Dependent Liking	25%	27%	26%
Sup. & Relation. Dependent Liking	20%	20%	20%
No Response/No Theme	4%	5%	5%
	100% (n=86)	100% (n=86)	100% (n=172)
TOPICS:* (Superior Dependent)			
Communication	8%	14%	11%
Managerial Competence	27%	29%	28%
Personal Competence	52%	53%	53%
TOPICS: (Relationship Dependent)			
Communication	9%	7%	8%
Interpersonal Relationship	19%	0%	9%
Mentorship	6%	26%	16%
Confidence/Credibility	9%	12%	10%
Recognition	5%	2%	3%
Autonomy	14%	7%	10%
Overall Subordinate Competence	28%	20%	24%
Overall Communication Competence	17%	21%	19%

*Topic percentages will sum to more than 100% because it is possible for more than one topic to appear in a message.

SUMMARY TABLE 2

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DISLIKING MESSAGES

CATEGORIES	MALE BOSS	FEMALE BOSS	ALL BOSSES
THEMES:			
Superior Dependent Disliking	62%	56%	59%
Relationship Dependent Disliking	21%	16%	18%
Sup. & Relation. Dependent Disliking	2%	9%	6%
No Response/No Disliking	15%	19%	17%
TOPICS:* (Superior Dependent)			
Communication	9%	3%	6%
Managerial Competence	31%	35%	33%
Personal Competence	27%	27%	27%
Overworked/Too Busy	0%	8%	4%
TOPICS: (Relationship Dependent)			
Communication/Information	12%	9%	10%
Lack of Recognition	10%	0%	5%
Lack of Confidence	3%	16%	10%
Overall Subordinate Competence	14%	16%	15%
Overall Communication Competence	21%	13%	17%

*Topic percentages will sum to more than 100% because it is possible for more than one topic to be present in a message.

SUMMARY TABLE 3

RANK ORDERING OF REASONS FOR LIKING AND DISLIKING THE BOSS

REASONS FOR LIKING	REASONS FOR DISLIKING
MALE BOSSES	
1. Personal Competence	1. Managerial Competence
2. Subordinate Competence	2. Personal Competence
3. Managerial Competence	3. Communication Competence
4. Interpersonal Relations	4. Subordinate Competence
5. Communication Competence	
FEMALE BOSSES	
1. Personal Competence	1. Managerial Competence
2. Managerial Competence	2. Personal Competence
3. Mentorship	3. Subordinate Competence
4. Communication	4. Communication Competence
5. Subordinate Competence	
ALL BOSSES	
1. Personal Competence	1. Managerial Competence
2. Managerial Competence	2. Personal Competence
3. Subordinate Competence	3. Communication Competence
4. Communication Competence	4. Subordinate Competence
5. Mentorship	

GLOSSARY 1

LIKING

SHARED AND UNIQUE DESCRIPTORS OF MALE AND FEMALE BOSSES

SHARED	MALE	FEMALE
COMMUNICATION:		
Frank	NONE	Receptive to New Ideas
Direct		Willingness to Talk
To the Point		Open to Constructive Suggestions
Listens		
Communication		
Open to Discussion		
MANAGERIAL COMPETENCE:		
Knowledge	Respectful	Power
Professionalism	Appreciative	Financial Genius
Effective	Efficient	Probing Mind
Intelligent	Logical	Creative
Organized	Aggressive in Work	Experienced
Gets Results	Meets Deadlines	Delegates
Leadership	Informed	Expects Performance
	Participative Mgt.	Dedicated
	Brilliant	Committed
		Honest in Business Dealings
PERSONAL COMPETENCE:		
Honest	Personality	Congenial
Considerate	Intense	Polite
Kind	Serious	Amiable
Fair	Ambitious	Loyal
Friendly	Character	Reasonable
Patient	Demands Respect	Flexible
Understanding	Cool & Calm	Pleasant
Humane	Informal	Nice
Sense of Humor	Caring	Moral
Open Minded	Sensitive	Enthusiastic
Easy Going	Helpful	Energetic
	Complementary	
	Compassionate	
	Thoughtful	

GLOSSARY 2

LIKING

SHARED AND UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP DESCRIPTORS OF MALE AND FEMALE BOSSES

SHARED	MALE	FEMALE
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS:		
NONE	Easy to get along with Fun to work with Caring of my feelings Good to me Respects me as a person He gets me whatever I need	NONE
MENTORSHIP:		
Encourages achievement Concerned about my career	NONE	Willing to teach me all she knows Interested in my development There to help Loyal to staff Encourages me to take on responsibility
CONFIDENCE/CREDIBILITY		
Trusts my decisions Values my opinions and input Believes in my ability to do a job well Supportive	NONE	Allows me to be creative
RECOGNITION:		
NONE	Knows my worth Rewards and compliments Thanks me for a job well done	Gives me credit for things I do Gives me recognition
AUTONOMY:		
Leaves me alone	Lets me set things up Complete run of the office Freedom to work independently Full responsibility	NONE

GLOSSARY 3

DISLIKING

SHARED AND UNIQUE DESCRIPTORS OF MALE AND FEMALE BOSSES

SHARED	MALE	FEMALE
COMMUNICATION:		
Failure to keep me informed	Listening Unclear Inability to communicate	No time to communicate
MANAGERIAL COMPETENCE:		
Procrastination Attention to details Unorganized Inability to deal with pressure Perfectionist	Authoritarian Immature Forgetful Lateness Lack of Decisions Poor Time Management Problem Avoidance Doesn't follow the rules Failure to accept responsibility for his mistakes	Office Politics Delegation Resists Change Total Efficiency Slow in Making Decisions
PERSONAL COMPETENCE:		
Moody Closed Mind Opinionated	Temper Dishonest Character Picky Lacks Enthusiasm Arrogant Self-Centered Grumpy Sarcastic Critical Rude Too Easy Going	Impatient Aloof Demanding Stubborn Aggressive Ambitious Ultra-Professional Irrational Blunt

GLOSSARY 4

DISLIKING

SHARED AND UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP DESCRIPTORS OF MALE AND FEMALE BOSSES

SHARED	MALE	FEMALE
RECOGNITION:		
Expects to much of me	Doesn't Recognize my work Lack of Appreciation Interrupts me for trivial matters	NONE
CONFIDENCE/CREDIBILITY:		
Double Checks my Work Constantly Watching	Will not listen to my suggestions	Appears to be dissatisfied with my work Interferes with the tasks she has given me